

Violence, Politics and Culture in the Weimar Era – The Second *Kulturkampf*

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by

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Dedicated to my Grandfather, Dr.
Keith E. Mixter, who always
motivated me to study and pursue
what I loved

Introduction

The deep socio-cultural changes which occurred during the Weimar Republic have been obscured by the political and economic explanations as to why the government collapsed in 1933. The commonly-accepted view is that the initial signing of the Versailles Treaty was a political mistake that doomed the fledgling Republic from the time of its founding. In conjunction with the political failures, the hyperinflation of 1922 and the Great Depression of 1929 have been the primary points which scholars have cited when trying to explain and understand the downfall of the democratic government. However, in order to fully understand and explain the violent forces that ripped the Republic asunder, one has to delve deeply into the fabric of the German culture and examine the titanic clash that occurred between German traditionalists and progressives during the Weimar era.¹

The dawn of the twentieth century shone brightly for Germany. The various German kingdoms unified in 1871, having humiliated France in the Franco-Prussian War. The German Empire became the predominant power in middle Europe. Otto von Bismarck, the first Chancellor of the Empire, set the tone for modern German *Kultur*, basing it on of the Prussian model of tradition and authority.² Gone were the romantic German ideals of Goethe and Schiller. They were replaced by the forward-looking, ambitious and, most importantly, traditionally Prussian principles embodied in Bismarck's *Blut und Eisen* (blood and iron) speech, given in 1862. The land of poets and

¹ By necessity given the scope of this paper, German culture is viewed through the prism of the mainstream of German society. German culture was a cornerstone of overall German national identity, and it certainly varied from area to area geographically, particularly in the more rural regions which never really experienced directly the cultural shifts that were occurring largely in the urban areas. However, by looking at mainstream German culture one can form a good understanding of the general mindset of the majority of the German people and their resulting reaction against the Weimar Republic.

² Dietrich Orlow. *A History of Modern Germany 1871 to Present* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education 2008) 5-6.

thinkers, which embraced the romantic idea of a united Germany, was transformed into a land controlled by traditional Prussian militarism and politics. Any progressive movements were dealt with swiftly and decisively by the powerful army.³

During the early years of the German Empire, Otto von Bismarck used his power and authority to wage a cultural war, *Kulturkampf*, against those whom he viewed as “un-German.” His first target was the Catholics.⁴ Bismarck feared that their democratic elements and their social agendas posed a threat to the conservative empire that he had forged. He also hoped that by attacking the Catholics, he could isolate France, which was a “traditional protector of the Roman Catholic church,” and in turn form a closer bond with Italy and Russia, which were both anti-clerical and “not on good terms with the Vatican.”⁵ Anti-Catholic laws were enacted and ministers who were Catholic were replaced by Protestants. Bismarck’s goal was to ostracize Catholics from German society and consequently force them to the outside. The second phase of Bismarck’s *Kulturkampf* was focused against the socialists. Bismarck viewed the socialist movement as a “bearer of an entire *Weltanschauung*,” which was poised to reconstruct the whole of German society.⁶ The socialists faced the same persecution as the Catholics. Both the Catholics and the socialists were viewed as “*Reichsfeinde*,” which lived “completely outside the pale of accepted society.”⁷

By the outbreak of the Great War, Germany had closed the gap between itself and the other two leading European great powers, France and Great Britain. German

³ Mary Fulbrook. *A Concise History of Germany* (Cambridge, UK Cambridge: University Press 1991) 128-129.

⁴ Koppel S. Pinson. *Modern Germany: Its History and Civilization*. (New York: Macmillan Publishing 1966) 187.

⁵ Pinson 187.

⁶ Pinson 195.

⁷ Pinson 196.

industrialization had caught up with and, in some areas, exceeded that of all other European nations. In little over one generation German steel, energy, and chemical production had outstripped the continent's previous leader, Great Britain.⁸ Still, the pride with which the German people entered the new century seemingly was held in check by the dominance of both British and French culture. To the Germans, the Great War represented more than a simple conflict ignited by the assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand of Austria; rather, it also embodied the right of German *Kultur* to survive and thrive in the new century.⁹ Contemporaries wrote of war as a "life-giving principle"¹⁰ and as "the price one must pay for culture."¹¹ The Germans wanted to forge their own path to greatness but they found themselves sandwiched between the culture of Russia to the east and the mighty civilizations of France, Great Britain and America in the west. In August 1914, war was seen not only as a fundamental component in German culture, but also as a necessity in order to prolong the German Empire and carry it forward to its rightful place in the sun.

Warfare held a special place in the cultures of the European powers. Conflict was seen as the foundation of culture, and was used to help elevate and project a nation's culture above that of a rival.¹² The infatuation with war reached its height in Germany. Peter Gay described this absurdity by commenting that "The overaged, the adolescent, the unfit, volunteered with pure joy, and went to death filled with their mission."¹³

⁸ Modris Eksteins. *Rites of Spring* (New York, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company 1989) 68

⁹ The tension between *Kultur* and *Zivilization* dominated German society. *Kultur* was the dominant force in Russia, while the British, French and Americans embraced the idea of *Zivilization*.

¹⁰ Friedrich von Bernhardi. *Germany and the Next War* translated by Allen H. Powles (New York: Charles A. Eron 1914) 18.

¹¹ Eksteins 90.

¹² Eksteins 91.

¹³ Peter Gay. *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (New York, New York: Harper and Row Publishers 1968) 11.

Warfare and violence were such well-grounded principles in German culture that, even after the Great War ended, they continued to hold great value and were materialized through revolution and paramilitarism.¹⁴ The adherence to violence created a dangerous and volatile political atmosphere during the Weimar Republic, which prevented the roots of democracy from fully developing.

The end of the Great War brought with it dramatic changes to Europe. The once mighty German Empire, which had waged war in order to push forth the idea of *Deutsche Kultur*, was physically exhausted and depleted of resources.¹⁵ The German army was still entrenched in France, having not given up any German land to the Entente, when the armistice was signed on November 11, 1918. The vigor with which Germany's young men had volunteered in 1914 was still present, but had been silenced and halted. The Treaty of Versailles was interpreted by many Germans as a stab in the back by their own government.¹⁶ A feeling of resentment and mistrust characterized the political environment of the Weimar Republic. The nation's rising sun had been prematurely extinguished not on the battlefield, but rather in governmental chambers.

The Weimar Republic was created in the immediate aftermath of the Great War. The parliamentary government was the brainchild of politicians, who were viewed as traitors and responsible for stabbing Germany in the back. The Weimar era was in essence a second *Kulturkampf*, in which the socialist dominated parliamentary government forced liberal change in Germany against the will of the masses in order to push forward its progressive agenda. As with Bismarck's *Kulturkampf*, the one that took

¹⁴ Robert Gerwarth and John Horne, "The Great War and Paramilitarism in Europe, 1917-1923" *Contemporary European History* 19/3 (August 2010) 269.

¹⁵ Orlow 102.

¹⁶ Orlow 119.

place during the Weimar era failed. Instead of resolving itself peacefully, the democratic government was ripped apart. In order accurately to account for all of the factors that led to the demise of the Weimar Republic, one has to look at its failure as a popular reaction against the German postwar society, rather than merely against the political institution specifically.

Violence

During the tumultuous early years of the Republic, assassinations were frequent and were used to express discontent over the condition in which Germany found itself following the Treaty of Versailles. Those killings were carried out both by followers of the extreme right and of the extreme left. Conducted primarily against politicians, the assassinations destabilized the already rocky Republic and cast doubts in the minds of all Germans over whether the democratic government could ever fully develop and thrive.¹⁷ Matthias Erzberger was one of the earliest political figures of the Republic to be gunned down in this “Wild West” environment which came to characterize Germany during the months of revolution. His assassination on August 26, 1921 was directly linked to his support for the Republic and his involvement in the acceptance and signing of the peace treaty with the allies. He was labeled as a traitor by the *Oetzkoer Zeitung*, which commented following his death that he “suffered the fate which the vast majority of patriotic Germans have long desired for him.”¹⁸ Erzberger’s was only the beginning of a string of political assassinations, the motives behind which were not only to destabilize

¹⁷ Eric D. Weitz. *Weimar Germany* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 2007) 99.

¹⁸ Klaus Epstein. *Matthias Erzberger and the Dilemma of German Democracy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1959) 389.

the fledgling republic, but also to make a statement about the course Germany had chosen to take following the war.

The reaction to the assassinations reflected the general distrust and ambivalence that the German people felt towards the democratic government. Politicians, who were honestly fighting for the people of Germany and trying to turn the country's misfortunes around, were targeted and killed with little or no reaction from the courts.¹⁹ The reactions and protests from the German people, although significant at times, were not widely acted upon, and paled in comparison to the power of violent political groups on either side of the political scale.²⁰ The assassination of Walter Rathenau on June 22, 1922 highlighted the extent to which the opposition was willing to go in order to undermine the Republic. Rathenau was a highly successful businessman, and as Foreign Minister he helped to negotiate the favorable Treaty of Rapallo, which was signed only two months before his assassination. Rathenau was Minister of Reconstruction, in which capacity he was responsible for successfully helping curb the rampant inflation.²¹ Regardless of his economic successes, he was gunned down by members of the Organization Counsel, an ultra-nationalist group that also had been responsible for the earlier assassination of Erzberger. The political assassinations of both Erzberger and Rathenau reveal the true intentions of the murderers. Although both men helped to create a functioning and prosperous government, they were nevertheless viewed as traitors and threats to German society. Consequently, when the Republic was in its darkest hour, its

¹⁹ Gay 21.

²⁰ Weitz 100.

²¹ Hans Mommsen translated by Elborg Forster and Larry Eugene Jones. *The Rise and Fall of Weimar Democracy* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press 1996) 125.

brightest political stars were murdered by extremists in the hope to facilitate a self-induced political implosion.

Throughout the period of 1918 to 1922 the string of assassinations was dealt with only lightly by the German court system. Of the 376 total assassinations, 354 were linked to groups on the extreme right.²² Shockingly, out of those 376 assassinations only eighteen cases were ever even prosecuted, and of that paltry number only one was related to a right-wing extremist. The judicial system of the Weimar Republic was essentially the same as that of the Empire – the judges who had been in place were allowed to maintain their positions, bringing along with them the same mindset that had been commonplace in German society prior to creation of the Republic.²³ Crimes committed by the right were dealt with superficially if at all, whereas crimes from the left were prosecuted vigorously and to the fullest extent of the law, including the imposition of ten death sentences in the assassination cases.²⁴ The court system used its power to *prosecute* as a means to *persecute* those regarded as posing a threat to traditional Wilhelmine political culture. This bias in prosecuting political extremists reflected the judicial system's adherence to traditional customs. Although the courts could not directly attack the freedom of political parties to exist, they could create an environment in which those who were seen as dissidents received selected punishment.

Politics

The two groups that found new voice in the political playground of the Weimar Republic were the extreme left and the extreme right. The German people, who

²² Gay 20.

²³ Mommsen 127.

²⁴ Gay 20.

previously had followed a middle-of-the-road political ideology, were forced to either migrate to the extremes or remain voiceless in the middle.²⁵ Previously well-established political parties, such as the *Zentrumspartei* and the *SPD*, found that their members were gravitating to more radical groups. The reality of this shift culminated in the parliamentary elections of 1930, in which the extreme KPD and NSDAP parties won a combined 184 seats, compared to only 143 by the SPD and 68 by the Center party. This statistic is particularly shocking considering that, in 1928, those two parties combined had achieved only 66 seats, compared to the SPD's 153 and Center's 62.²⁶ This political gravitation to the extremes reflected starkly the divergence in German social and cultural ideology.

Due to the number of political parties that existed during the Weimar Republic, it was nearly impossible for one to control enough seats in parliament to hold a majority. Consequently, the SPD and the Center party worked together to form a coalition government.²⁷ The "Grand Coalition" was responsible for the signing and ratification of the Treaty of Versailles and for many Germans executive power of parliament was too similar to the democratic institutions of Great Britain and France. The coalition symbolized the political success of the democratic institution, but also came to embody the defeat of the German nation in 1919.²⁸ Regardless of which political party Germans voted for on Election Day, their ballots were symbols of support for an institution that they felt had stabbed them in the back.

²⁵ V. R. Berghahn. *Modern Germany Society, economy and politics in the twentieth century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987) 89.

²⁶ Berghahn 301.

²⁷ Pinson 396.

²⁸ Pinson 398.

In the later years of the Republic, voters began to abandon the SPD and Center parties in favor of the extremes, the DSNAP and to a lesser extent the KPD. Both extremes, although they participated in parliament, considered the Weimar Republic a disaster. The extreme right blamed the government for its role in the peace treaty and claimed to “undo the shackles of Versailles” if brought to power. In the elections of 1930, the DSNAP received 6,409,600 votes (18.3%) compared to 810,000 (2.6%) in 1928. In contrast, the SPD lost almost 1 million votes and continued to lose support up until the collapse of the Republic. By the March 5, 1933 election, the DSNAP had gained the support of 17 Million Germans compared to a combined 12 million votes for the SPD and Center party.²⁹ The shift to the extreme was a materialization of the angst that the German people felt towards the Republic.

The communist movement and other movements that appeared in Germany following the end of the Great War embodied the push to radically change the structure German society, which the activists claimed had been primarily responsible for the outbreak of hostilities in 1914. Left-wing fighters formed groups which marched in cities and ran for local political positions. They posted billboards that highlighted the power and potential of communism, reading “*Die Flamme der Revolution darf nicht erlöschen*” (the flame of revolution may never be extinguished).³⁰ These communist groups opposed the Republic on the grounds that, following the war, Germany had not changed enough. The same capitalists and political officials who had brought Germany to the brink of destruction during the Great War still were in the positions of power within the

²⁹ Pinson 604.

³⁰ Weitz 93.

Republic.³¹ The problem for the *KPD* and other communist organizations proved to be not that of political institutions, but rather of German class structure itself.

In response to the movements and advances of the political left, the right also developed into a violent and power lobbying group during the Weimar Republic. They also fought against the new German society and, as from the left, the Republic became the focal point of the attacks from the right. However, rather than their claim being that the Weimar Republic had not changed Germany enough, which was the rallying call of the left, those on the right believed that it had gone too far in creating a Germany that no longer embodied the *Deutscher Geist* (German Spirit).³² The right called on the people to throw off the shackles of Versailles and return Germany to its rightful place in the sun. According to Ernst Jünger, the act of destroying the Republic would help facilitate “the rebirth and breakthrough of the nation.”³³ As seen through his commentary, the destruction of the democratic institution was a reflection of the right’s goal to generate a new Germany. According to Jünger, the logical way to do so was by following the same social and cultural standards which had elevated the country to the status of a world power prior to the outbreak of the Great War.

As a result of political polarization, centrist political parties were forced to shift themselves to either extreme in order to remain relevant. It was noted by one Catholic union laborer that “We used to argue with the Reds every day in the factory over religious, moral, and political questions. Now all that has ended and we recognize

³¹ Weitz 91.

³² Weitz 92.

³³ Ernst Jünger, *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler and Sohn 1926) 16.

together only one enemy: Capitalism!"³⁴ This shift to the extremes manifested itself in the political ineffectiveness of the Republic. The government, which relied on party coalitions to maintain a majority in the Reichstag, was unable to function efficiently because, as the parties drifted to either extreme, their willingness to cooperate diminished.³⁵ The failure of the Weimar Republic was a direct result of political polarization, but the cause of the political polarization was not so much a reaction directly against the political institution as it was as an objection to the environment of the Weimar Republic.

Violence in Politics

Both extremes used violence to express disgust over what they felt had poisoned the German landscape. The *Freikorps*, a paramilitary organization composed primarily of disillusioned war veterans, relied on strict military structure as a means to create stability in their lives. Through violence and traditionalism, the members of the *Freikorps* intended to create a utopia.³⁶ The group initially was hired by the government to combat communist unrest, but later was turned away for its brutal use of violence against opponents on the left. Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, both of whom were prominent figures in the leftist *KPD*, were killed by members of the *Freikorps* in January, 1919. Sebastian Haffner commented wryly on the news saying that the both were shot and killed “while attempting to escape,” observing that ““shooting while attempting to

³⁴ Thomas Knapp. “The Red and the Black: Catholic Socialists in the Weimar Republic” *The Catholic Historical Review* 61/3 (July 1975) 389.

³⁵ Berghahn 88.

³⁶ Jeffrey Herf. *Reactionary Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1984) 24.

escape'...became the conventional manner of dealing with political opponents."³⁷

Ironically, the violent way in which social opposition was dealt with by the *Freikorps* only served further to undermine the authority and effectiveness of the Republic which it had purported to serve.

The extreme left was no less violent in its dealing with opponents. The fight to cause a social revolution in Germany manifested itself through political opposition. The communists fought for a Germany which would be dominated by labor. Eric Weitz commented that "if the republic were able to promote economic progress and provide avenues of political participation, at least some of these workers could be won to its side."³⁸ He went on to observe that progress and political freedom were not enough to win over the communists: "From its founding, the *KPD* was committed to continual confrontation with the republic."³⁹ The preferred method of bringing about change in Germany was through violence. Communist ideology looked towards a future free from the burdens of an aristocratic upper class, and it used violence to try and facilitate the development of that utopia. According to Weitz, "violence came to have a political meaning and a certain psychological allure for Soviets as well as German Communists, and found its expression in the day-to-day political and cultural practices of the *KPD*."⁴⁰ The government was relatively tolerant of the *KPD*, allowing it to protest elections and hold public demonstrations, but organizations such as the *Freikorps* and other extreme activists on the extreme right were not as lenient towards the left's seemingly unchecked

³⁷ Haffner 33.

³⁸ Weitz 91.

³⁹ Weitz 91.

⁴⁰ Eric D. Weitz. "Communism and the Public Spheres of the Weimar Republic": in *Between Reform and Revolution*. Edited by David E. Barclay and Eric D. Weitz (New York: Berghahn Books 1998) 279.

infiltration of German society. Thus the extreme left was pitted against the extreme right in a battle to determine the future of the lost, disillusioned country.

The ultimate triumph of the right reflected the overall German opinion towards the Weimar Republic and its *Zeitgeist*: it was fundamentally un-German. The reaction against the spirit and environment of the Weimar Republic manifested itself in the traditionalism of the extreme right. In order to rectify the mistakes of the Treaty of Versailles and of the Weimar Republic, the German people were willing to embrace methods of action and thought that were familiar to them, primarily traditional Prussian militarism and authoritarianism.⁴¹ The middle-class Germans who dominated the political life of the Weimar Republic grew up in a traditional Wilhelmine society, which viewed socialism and communism as a deadly threat to civil society.⁴² The right propagated the fear of communism by claiming that, if it was not dealt with decisively, the left would lead a revolution similar to that in Russia in 1917. The rightist DNVP used political posters depicting traditionally-dressed Germans and reading “*Wir halten fest an Wort Gottes! Wählt deutschnational*” (We hold firm to the word of God! Vote German national), seeking to reawaken the *Deutscher Geist*.⁴³ The extreme right’s manipulation and monopolization of the *Deutscher Geist* and adherence to German tradition allowed it to topple the pillars of democratic order. The reaction against the political atmosphere in Germany was intensified by the anger over the radical changes that took place in Weimar society.

⁴¹ Gay 139.

⁴² William L. Patch Jr. “Class Prejudice and the Failure of the Weimar Republic” *German Studies Review* 12/1 (February 1989) 36.

⁴³ Weitz 95.

Culture

Another site of contention was internationalization. While the internationalization that took place in Germany following the Great War was embraced by those who had felt constrained by the traditionalism of Wilhelmine society; at the same time the movement was vilified by those who felt that international influences threatened to dilute, if not completely eradicate, the once proud and mighty German *Kultur*. The internationalization of Germany manifested itself through the development of the modern metropolis. Berlin not only was the capital of the Weimar Republic; it also was the epicenter of Weimar cultural and societal experimentation. Even though the city previously was the center of traditional conservative authority, after the war it was transformed into “the place for the ambitious, the energetic, the talented.”⁴⁴ The avant-garde artists of the Wilhelmine Germany, who had dominated the art scene and defined German culture prior to 1918, were replaced by young artists who wanted to change the notion and concept of art. They came to Berlin in order to experience a truly international environment, and architects flocked to the city in order to transform the otherwise traditional façades into ones which would rival those in London or New York. The city “delighted most, terrified some, but left no one indifferent”.⁴⁵ The clash between traditional conservatism and modern progressivism transformed Berlin into a battleground on which diametrically opposed parties fought for what they saw as the future of Germany.

In the years following the end of the Great War, the city of Berlin radically changed. The infrastructure was updated and conventional German buildings, which

⁴⁴ Gay 128.

⁴⁵ Gay 129.

epitomized traditional German culture, were replaced by modernist department stores and office buildings. The Berlin skyline lit-up the night, as electric lights were installed throughout the city. As Wietz noted, to walk the city was, above all else, “to sense modernity”⁴⁶ New clubs opened that, unlike the beer gardens of the past, adopted world themes. The *Haus Vaterland* was one such establishment in which patrons could enjoy “a Bavarian room, a Viennese room, a Rhineland terrace, an Italian room, and a French Bistro”⁴⁷ For an even more international feel, guests could also visit the “Wild West Bar with its African American jazz band.”⁴⁸ A contemporary commented that, in Berlin, “for not much money you can get a breath of the wider world.”⁴⁹ Germany was no longer just a place only for Germans, or for that matter only for Europeans, to congregate and interact.

Reaction against the alteration of the city arose from all strata, but most prominently from the older generations and from the political right. Joseph Goebbels, who took command of the Nazi party in the city, sneered at the modern electrical infrastructure. He claimed that “the confusion between night and day signified its degeneration”⁵⁰ The conservative journalist Wilhelm Stapel referred to Berlin as the “cesspool of the Republic, the spoiler of all noble and healthy life.”⁵¹ The attacks against the city of Berlin reflected the larger discontent with the direction that Germany as a whole had taken after the war. Critics of the era viewed the changes in Germany as clear evidence that German culture had been defeated and crushed by the victorious Entente.

⁴⁶ Weitz 42.

⁴⁷ Weitz 48.

⁴⁸ Weitz 49.

⁴⁹ Siegfried Kracauer. *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany*. Translated by Quintin Hoare (London: Verso 1998) 91.

⁵⁰ Weitz 76.

⁵¹ Weitz 76.

Their goal in fighting against the metropolis, and in turn against the Republic, was to turn back the clock and recreate a proud and powerful Germany that would once again be able to challenge (and this time defeat) the old powers of Europe and spread German *Kultur* across the continent. In conjunction with all of the superficial changes made to the Berlin's façade, there were larger and even more deeply unsettling changes going on in the city: fundamental changes in the German people themselves.

In the 1920s, women broke out into the public realm of society, energized by the economic potential presented to them during the Great War. With money and time to spare, they began to take advantage of the new clubs and stores that were popping up all over major metropolises.⁵² One such store was Erich Mendelsohn's Columbus Haus, a *Kaufhaus* built on Potsdamer Platz. In addition to the style of the structure clashing architecturally with the surrounding facades, the overall purpose and function of the building was new and strange to the Germans. The Columbus House epitomized everything that was modern: from its English name, to its smooth window filled exterior to its primarily female clientele and staff.⁵³ As soldiers came home from the trenches they found a new type of woman; one who worked during the day and in the evening enjoyed the city nightlife, such as the acclaimed *Vaterland*, in the evening. The emergence of women into the public sphere was not well accepted by all Germans, primarily those right of center, who believed that women should follow a more traditional role, namely staying at home to raise and care for the children.

The social ideology of the right, primarily that of the Nazis, directly opposed women's new public presence and independence, and found the society which allowed

⁵² Weitz 55.

⁵³ Weitz 52.

these new freedoms to be degenerate and fundamentally un-German. The role of women, according to Nazi ideology, was to remain in the home and nurture the future of the German *Volk*: the children.⁵⁴ The emergence of women into the public sphere was seen not only as a threat to traditional German culture, but also (and more importantly) as a threat to the German population, which experienced a radical decrease in births after 1914. The statistical population pyramid, which shows that the losses from the Great War, the decrease in births during the war and the decline in births during the years of economic crises displays a rapidly dwindling German population during the 1920s.⁵⁵

In order to recreate the mighty German Empire, women would have to remain home and focus primarily on having children. It was believed that “in a truly German society,... women would work and fight for the common good alongside their men.”⁵⁶ The best way for women to serve the nation was at home rearing children. Raising children was not seen as a personal joy, but rather as a national duty. Men and women were expected to serve the country either by fighting or by bearing children, respectively.⁵⁷ A society that not only allowed, but actually facilitated, women to leave the home and enter the workplace, making them capable of living independently of men, was a society that detracted from the *Deutscher Geist* and consequently threatened the future of the nation.

The overriding sense of freedom and independence with which women entered the public arena was not the only “un-German” characteristic of the Weimar era. In

⁵⁴ Charu Gupta. “Politics of Gender: Women in Nazi Germany” *Economic and Political Weekly* 26/17 (April 27, 1991) 40.

⁵⁵ Age structure of the population in the German Reich (according to the Reich Statistisches Jahrbuch 1939).

⁵⁶ Leila J. Rupp. “Mother of the “Volk”: The image of Women in Nazi Ideology” *Signs* 3/2 (Winter 1977) 364.

⁵⁷ Rupp 363.

1919, Walter Gropius opened the *Bauhaus* in Weimar as an art school that pushed the boundaries of art and architecture. The goal was to abandon “snobbish distinction” in order to facilitate “the new building of the future”.⁵⁸ The traditional German architectural styles were replaced by clean, modernist buildings characterized by smooth facades and recessed windows. Bruno Taut introduced these techniques in his design of the *Onkel Toms* housing development.⁵⁹ The modernist buildings were a physical materialization of the new future that Weimar Germans were striving to create.

The rejection of traditional artistic and architectural styles, previously promoted by the state, aggravated and estranged not only craftsmen but also right-wing activists, who feared that the new styles would strip Germany of its cultural heritage. Traditional professors of architecture, such as Emil Högg, claimed that the new style represented “nomadic architecture” because the structures were rootless; having no grounding in any cultural tradition.⁶⁰ Architecture was meant to be a physical reflection of a nation’s heritage. The fact that the *Bauhaus* threw away traditionalism in order to create a new Germany was the precise reason why so many people on the right objected to the work of Gropius and his colleagues. The styles of the *Bauhaus* were seen on the political right as an affront to German culture and a threat to future of the nation. The perceived cultural threat of the new architectural style, which inevitably was tied to and directly associated with the Weimar Republic, was so strong that, following the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, the *Bauhaus* actually was shut down.

In tandem with the new styles of architecture, other modes of art flourished and came to embody the spirit of the Republic: namely a push against the traditional culture

⁵⁸ Gay 98.

⁵⁹ Weitz 62.

⁶⁰ Weitz 201.

of Wilhelmine Germany. The end of censorship in 1918 allowed for artists to uninhibitedly express themselves both on canvas and on stage. Otto Dix drew grotesque scenes of brutality to characterize the horrors of the Great War and to critique the violence which had infiltrated German society.⁶¹ Cabarets, which prior to 1918 had been relatively reserved due to the censorship laws, exploded into mainstream German society. What had been light satire and slightly risqué performances became blatantly pornographic and grotesque in nature. The cabaret performer's routine relied primarily on jokes concerning bodily functions and explicit detail of sexual relationships.⁶² The direction which art took during the Weimar era reflected the desire to create something new and in direct opposition to the conservative culture of the Empire.

The excesses to which the cabarets and artists went in the effort to create a new German cultural heritage evoked strong opposition from critics. The right claimed that the end of censorship threatened Germany by allowing insidious, "degenerate" artists to poison and dilute German culture with degenerate art.⁶³ It was noted by one critic of the new direction of cabaret that "The gates to intellectual freedom had been opened, but at the same time the door was cast wide for all the parasites of art, who, in their businesslike fashion, speculated on the most lowly instincts of the mass and were not ashamed to prostitute art."⁶⁴ As was the case with *Bauhaus* architecture, artistic freedom ultimately was crushed by the conservative juggernaut of traditional German culture.

Music was another mode of art which, during the Weimar era, diverged from traditional German customs. Jazz music came to epitomize the internationalization of

⁶¹ Weitz 328.

⁶² Alan Lareau. "The German Cabaret Movement during the Weimar Republic" *Theater Journal* 43/4 (December 1991) 478.

⁶³ Gay 107.

⁶⁴ Lareau 475.

German society, although it was not always given the international credit that it deserved. It was American, and consequently modern.⁶⁵ The bending of tones, frequent change in tempo, and strong lyrical rhythms were juxtaposed with the traditional military marches and operas that had dominated the professional musical scene of Wilhelmine Germany. The swinging rhythm of jazz music flourished in dance halls throughout every German metropolis. The popular Berlin nightclub, the *Vaterland*, had a room dedicated exclusively to this newly-popular music form.⁶⁶ Jazz embodied the new voice of German culture, and consequently came under attack by those who felt that Germany had lost its way in history.

In studying the acceptance of jazz music into popular German culture, musicologists went to the trouble of developing their own story of how it had originated in continental Europe. While paying homage to African-American influences, Theodor Adorno claimed that German jazz essentially was European in origin.⁶⁷ His claim reflected the general understanding that Germans held regarding their adoption of jazz music – that jazz developed from European salon music, and therefore was rooted in the German cultural tradition. As the Nazis began to consolidate their power, jazz music underwent a retrograde transformation. Improvisation, syncopation, vocalized timbre, and instrumental breaks were all but eliminated from jazz music. What was left was “only underlying substance of jazz... a substance identical to that of the military march.”⁶⁸ Popular music no longer served the purpose of social dancing, but rather of propagating German militarism. What had been a rebellious music, meant to uproot and

⁶⁵ Weitz 50.

⁶⁶ J. Bradford Robinson. “The Jazz essays of Theodor Adorno: Some Thoughts on Jazz Reception in Weimar Germany” *Popular Music* 13/1 (January 1994) 7.

⁶⁷ Robinson 14.

⁶⁸ Robinson 21.

challenge traditional German culture, was manipulated and transformed by reactionaries to suit their desires. Ironically, the story of jazz music “parallel[ed] the downfall of the Weimar Republic itself.”⁶⁹

Intellectuals

The intellectual establishment of the Weimar Republic was heavily rooted in the conservative customs of Wilhelmine Germany. Traditional academic institutions in Germany acted as harbingers of conservatism against which the proponents of the Weimar Republic could not fight by which they eventually were overcome. Franz Neumann documented that, while he was a student at the University of Breslau, his economics teacher made a point of denouncing the Peace Resolution of 1917 before the start of his very first lecture.⁷⁰ One year later, while he was a student in Leipzig, a history professor conclusively proved “that democracy was an essentially non-German form of political organization, suitable for the materialistic Anglo-Saxons, but incompatible with the idealism of the Germanic race.”⁷¹ The very institutions that were responsible for producing the future generations of educated Germans were at the same time undermining the society in which their pupils would live and work.

The intellectual reaction against German postwar society came to be called the “conservative revolution.” One such intellectual, Oswald Spengler, was extremely critical of the Treaty of Versailles and decisively antidemocratic. He was a proponent of Social Darwinism, employing the theory to justify inequality. Within his world view,

⁶⁹ Robinson 21.

⁷⁰ Gay 43.

⁷¹ Gay 44.

good equated to powerful and bad equated to powerless.⁷² Spengler's most famous work, *The Decline of the West*, became the cornerstone of the right's conservative thinking during the 1920s. The book chronicled the rise to power and eventual demise of civilizations throughout history. The defining qualities of great civilizations were power and national will. All of the ones which Spengler documented attained their status through power, and he hoped that Germany once again could reassert itself through power and glory to forge a Third Reich.⁷³ To do so, he hoped to shift the younger generation's notion and concept of art and poetry. Progressive art needed to be pushed aside in order to rediscover the allure of technology and politics, thereby invigorating the spirit of *Kultur*.⁷⁴ *The Decline of the West* was wildly popular in all strata of German society, including among intellectuals on both the left and the right. Its theme, which symbolized the desire to return Germany to its former place of glory and underlined the undeniable connection between greatness and power, remained popular throughout the Weimar era.

Ernst Jünger was yet another intellectual who stood opposed to the democratic society of the Weimar Republic. He also considered himself to be a member of the "conservative revolution." Jünger wrote hundreds of essays that focused primarily on war, heroism, nationalism and sacrifice.⁷⁵ Having fought in the Great War, his literature appealed to war veterans, many of whom were unable to adjust themselves to the new society to which they returned home. Unlike Erich Maria Remarque in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Jünger glorified war and the experience of living and fighting in the

⁷² Oswald Spengler. *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (München: Beck 1923) 157.

⁷³ Spengler 465.

⁷⁴ Spengler 596.

⁷⁵ Herf 42.

trenches. He remembered the experience as “an exciting and romantic contact with sudden danger, death, masculine energy, and exotic and elemental forces.”⁷⁶ Both Spengler and Jünger were esteemed intellectuals who had attended German’s best schools and universities and were widely read by the general public. Their critiques concerning the state of German society and culture reverberated strongly throughout the masses, helping further to destabilize the already fragile Republic by depicting it as a barrier preventing Germany from returning to its former place in the sun.

When discussing the rhetoric and ideology of the German conservative right, it is easy, although generally inappropriate, to pass them off as reactionary. Although the Nazis capitalized on traditional German values and practices to facilitate their rise to power, their ultimate goal was to create a new future for Germany. Consequently, to call the Nazis reactionary is incorrect. The Nazis were a future-oriented movement that sought to regenerate and resurrect the Germany that was destroyed by the Weimar Republic.⁷⁷ They used modernist techniques, such as propaganda, radio, and mass political rallies, to help consolidate their power and influence over the German people. Although there was a strong emphasis and reliance on *völkisch* tradition, it was used not to “dwell on the past as a refuge from the present, but to transfuse elements of the healthy knowledge and values that thrived before the coming of modernity into a Germany seen as on the brink of total spiritual bankruptcy.”⁷⁸ The Nazis and conservative intellectuals such as Ernst Jünger were forward-looking, in the sense that they wanted to create a new and powerful Germany. To do so they adopted the rhetoric of traditional cultural ideals

⁷⁶ Ernst Jünger. *In Stahlgewittern* (Stuttgart: E Klett 1961) 99.

⁷⁷ Roger Griffin “The Primacy of Culture: The Current Growth (or Manufacture) of Consensus within Fascist Studies” *Journal of Contemporary History* 37/1 (January 2002) 27.

⁷⁸ Roger Griffin *Modernism and Fascism The Sense of Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2007) 258.

in order to manipulate the population, by promising them a future that was already stable and familiar.

Conclusion

The collapse of the Weimar Republic was multifaceted, and it is impossible to pinpoint one specific date or event that resulted in its ultimate failure. The best way to form a meaningful understanding regarding the downfall of the Republic is to examine the German culture during the Weimar era. The defeat of Germany in the Great War must be seen not only as a military defeat, but even more significantly as a cultural defeat. What resulted from the defeat was a complete reordering of German society. The Republic waged a second *Kulturkampf* against the traditional society of German Empire. The western style of parliamentary democracy was in direct opposition to the *Sonderweg* in which Germans prided themselves. Every time the Germans voted in parliamentary elections, rather than rejoicing in their newfound freedoms they subconsciously were reminded of the defeat of their German *Kultur*.

The very freedom allotted to the Germans during the Weimar era helped to facilitate the untimely demise of the Republic. During the revolution following the armistice, radical groups on both the left and the right formed and wove themselves into the fabric of the Germans' newly free society. The conflict between the two groups, in addition to their open hostilities towards the new norms of Weimar society, created a perpetual state of violence in which public discourse was difficult and dangerous. In addition to opposition from the political extremes, the Republic also faced passive opposition from the entrenched judicial system and from popular elements of the

intellectual community, who favored a return to a traditional Wilhelmine social structure. They believed that German society had gone dangerously astray following the Great War, and regarded modernist architecture and art as being fundamentally un-German and epitomizing the country's place in the shade following its defeat in 1918.

The prospect of crawling out of the shade and returning to their rightful place in the sun struck a vital cultural chord within the German masses. The conservative intellectuals and right-wing activists reiterated that the only way to save the country was to turn away from the new German society and reinstall traditional German values. The reaction against the second *Kulturkampf* was too great for the fledgling progressive culture. The Republic as a political entity was inevitably shackled to, and as an inevitable result was doomed to share the same fate as, the broader society and culture which it represented.

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